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INFO RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC  
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RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHINGTON DC  
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RUEHZU/ASIAN PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION  
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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

Department for CA/OCS/ACS/EAP, White House for NSC Bader

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: FAVORABLE WEATHER AIDS FIREFIGHTERS

Ref: A) Melbourne 23, B) Melbourne 21, C) Melbourne 20, D) Melbourne 17, E) Canberra 134, F) Canberra 100

Summary

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¶1. (SBU) Fire crews are making progress against the 20 active blazes in Victoria, though they expect less favorable weather by February ¶18. The death toll for Saturday's blazes stands at 181. Post has not received reports of any U.S. citizens injured or killed in the fires. While some parts of the state are moving to a recovery stage, others are still busy managing relief operations. End Summary.

Favorable Weather Conditions Helping

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¶2. (SBU) Cool temperatures, light winds and scattered showers have helped firefighters make progress against the 20 major fires still burning throughout Victoria. Although the death toll from Saturday's blazes stands at 181, disaster victim identification teams continue to search fire-affected areas and will likely continue to do so for many weeks. Christine Jessup at the Emergency Management Assistance (EMA) center informed post on February 12 that firefighters are organizing the "largest ever" fire containment line to protect a water catchment area near Yea (located 80 kilometers northeast of Melbourne). According to Jessup, crews are trying to gain the upper hand against the fires before anticipated hot weather and northerly winds set in on February 18. In response to severe damage to water catchments, Melbourne Water is already developing a rehabilitation plan.

¶3. (SBU) Additional emergency resources (NFI) are coming from New Zealand on February 13 and we expect the team of 60 U.S. wild fire experts to arrive on schedule on February 15. Foreign Minister Stephen Smith reportedly announced on February 12 that the GOA may accept foreign government offers of assistance once authorities better understand what will be needed. Victorian officials continue their hunt for suspected arsonists and arrested, but later released two suspects on February 12. Victoria Premier John Brumby is widely expected to announce today that the state will implement Australia's toughest building standards for fire prone areas. According to Brumby: "we must make sure this tragedy wasn't in vain: grasp this opportunity to develop Australia's first ever national approach to fire and rescue."

American Citizens

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¶4. (SBU) As of 4:30 PM local time, post had not received any reports of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the fires. We verified the well-being of one of two outstanding welfare and whereabouts (W&W)

requests outstanding from February 11 and continue to follow up on the second. Post received a Congressional W&W request on February 12 from Senator Mark Pryor's (AR) office. We have requested additional biographic data in order to carry out the request. ConGen Sydney received another Congressional W&W request on February 12 from Senator Richard Lugar (IN) and is working to confirm the well-being of the U.S. citizen concerned.

Comment

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[15](#). (SBU) Communities in Victoria are at differing stages of recovery. Many are still overwhelmed with relief operations and questions remain over the fate of the thousands of people displaced by the blazes. While an improved mood has set in among emergency crews who continue to make progress battling the fires, most acknowledge that events may still quickly take a turn for the worse.

THURSTON